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AUTHOR Shaver, Judy C.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Teacher education programs can benefit from research on student retention. By focusing on intervention for the very youngest student, failure at early levels may be reduced. Teachers must be taught to meet the needs of these students and to work more effectively with high-risk students who are potential drop-outs. Teachers can help at-risk students by reducing the potential of failure in the classroom, providing these students with communication skills, an essential element to school success. To be able to help these students, the most highly qualified people must be attracted and recruited into teaching. Admission criteria for teacher education programs must become more strict. Teacher salaries should be increased. (CB)

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THE IMPACT OF STUDENT RETENTION STUDIES ON TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Presented by:

Dr. Judy C. Shaver

Dr. Beth S. Wise

Dr. Rose M. Duhon

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The Impact of Student Retention Studies on
Teacher Education Programs

Public education in Louisiana is undergoing intense scrutiny as its programs are evaluated. Early failure in school, a high dropout rate, and a decline in the number of students being attracted to the teaching profession all point to the need for rethinking educational goals. This paper addresses influences related to student retention at these three critical periods.

Early educational theorists - Pestalozzi, Owen, Frobel, Montessori, and Dewey - believed that the education of young children should be based on their natural development, and that young children learn through self-discovery. These theorists believed that education should begin with the concrete and move toward abstraction, that perceptual development precedes thinking skills (Feeney, Christianson, and Moravcik, 1983). More recently, research done by such notables as Piaget, Klausmeier, Gagnè, Bruner and Vygotsky has confirmed these theories (Boehm, 1976; Pflaum, 1978, 1986).

Based on these findings, a number of recent researchers have developed programs to improve the school performance of children reared in poverty. These children have been found to be at-risk in the areas of language and cognitive development, as well as in school adaptation (Feagans, 1982; Snow, 1982; Tough, 1982).

Joan Tough (1982) conducted a longitudinal research study of young children from different social class groups in England. Her findings suggested that programs devoted to building vocabulary, practice of syntactic structures, and use of locational prepositions were too limited in scope. She suggested that intervention programs also should focus on

general skills of communication, and on the ability to think and reflect on experiences. This, she felt, would be best accomplished through the use of language in talking with others.

Research conducted by Catherine Snow (1982) found that interactions with children while "book reading" provided the opportunity for novel, complex, and creative use of language. These opportunities, she found, were lacking in the routine conversations in low-income homes.

Lynne Feagans (1982) found that many intervention programs focused on language skills which were not reinforced in the school environment. She concluded that at-risk children need assistance in using their language to adapt to the language material characteristic of school classrooms. In particular, she recommended that intervention programs for at-risk children focus on the development of dialogue skills and the sequence of moves and events in narrative dialogues, since this is the focus of teacher expectations within the framework of the classroom.

Following the preceding theories and research findings, the kindergarten program should provide the opportunity for improving general communication skills in all pupils through interactions, both pupil-pupil and pupil-teacher. The program should encourage the development of concepts through concrete experiences, dialogue, and directed reflective thinking. Children should be assisted in adapting the language they bring with them to the language of the classroom. Self-motivated learning should be encouraged in each pupil through the use of positive, successful learning experiences each day.

In the light of research findings, a kindergarten program with the preceding objectives should prepare at-risk pupils for successful experiences in beginning reading. If students are successful in learning to read,

they are much more likely to become successful in their future school experiences. This will be reflected as these successful students choose to remain in school and be graduated. Research shows that it is the unsuccessful student, the non-reader or functionally illiterate student, who chooses to drop out from school. Early success could be the key to continuous successful school participation.

The increasing rate of high school dropouts in the nation is of major concern to educational leaders, professionals outside the education field, and the general public. According to a report in the November 5,1984 edition of U.S. News and World Report, between 1972 and 1985, the percentage of ninth graders in the nation finishing public high school fell from 77.2 percent to 72.8 precent, with many urban areas showing rates below 60 percent. A U.S. Department of Education report said Louisiana's graduation rate declined from 64 percent of the freshmen receiving diplomas within four years to 57.2 percent - the lowest in the United States. The impact of this phenomenon is felt in many areas. The numbers of literate citizens working to support themselves, their families, and their communities are fewer. The numbers of functionally illiterate citizens on welfare involved in delinquency, drug abuse, and crime are increased. Research indicates that most criminals are functionally illiterate; ninety-five percent of all adult felons who appear in juvenile court did not finish high school. Also, half of the crimes in the United States are committed by young people below the voting age (Birdsall, 1977).

Our educational system needs to examine alternative and compensatory programs not only at the preschool level, but also at the critical middle-school level. Duhon and Mouton (1986) found in a study in Louisiana these reasons, indicated by students, for their dropping out of school:

frustration from failure in subject areas (16%); bored (15%); suspension or expulsion (13%); needed a job (11%); discipline problems (10%). Factors cited that might have encouraged the student to remain in school were: effective counseling (14%); better teacher/student rapport (13%); more faculty care and concern (10%); less restrictive rules and regulations (10%). The researchers categorized student answers as frustrated due to learning problems or bored because of lack of motivation. Recommendations included sensitivity training for teachers; parental involvement for support and to increase communication; curricula that removes fear of failure; and relevant and meaningful course offerings.

Compensatory programs early in the school experience for at-risk pupils are imperative. Additionally, alternative programs at the critical middle-school level are needed. Curricula which meet the needs of these students, whether failures or gifted, frustrated or bored, must be instituted. Genuine concern and caring on the part of middle-school teachers is also important.

A third component critical to educational programs in Louisiana is the attraction and retention of highly qualified people into teacher education programs. Elementary school enrollment rose by 54,000 nationally in the 1984-85 school year, and further gains are expected each year into the 1990's, at which time there will be a pervasive shortage of teachers. The predicted teacher shortage in Louisiana calls for an examinaton of the teaching profession as a career opportunity.

Recently a number of significant trends have emerged: aggregate numbers entering teacher education programs have steadily declined; the quality of applicants seeking teacher education majors has declined; and many teachers are dissatisfied with their career choice and are leaving

the field. The teacher pool is therefore dwindling just as a second-generation baby boom is ready to enter school.

A study by Nina Starr (1982) reports that the decrease of applicants in teacher education may be attributed to the fact that more choices are now open to females. Restricted career options for education majors may be another major reason for students choosing other careers.

The quality of our educational system depends, to a large degree, on the attraction of qualified students into teacher education. Profiles gathered from recent studies indicate a lowering of quality among applicants to preservice programs. Weaver (1981) surveyed college-bound high school seniors intending to major in 29 fields of study and found that those who expected to major in education scored 81 points below the average in their combined SAT scores.

A recent study (Womack and Shaver, 1986) of preservice and inservice teachers in Louisiana confirmed the "unrest" being observed today in the teaching profession. Almost half of the teachers surveyed, for example, do not plan to teach until retirement and almost half would not select teaching again as a career. A number of "female" response patterns seemed to emerge from the study: perception of salary was not reported to be very important in selecting a career; convenient hours related to family responsibilities was the second most frequently selected reason for choosing teaching as a career; and less than half of the teachers planned to teach until retirement. While pre-service subjects surveyed tended to profess a greater degree of commitment to the teaching profession, a number of their responses indicated unrealistic expectations.

How then do we attract and retain highly qualified people into teacher education programs? Admission criteria to schools of education

should become stricter. Competency-based teacher education curricular programs have been mandated in a number of states, and pre-entrance and pre-service examinations are being required for teacher candidates.

Low salaries are seen by most educators as a major problem. Until the base salary provided for teachers is increased, teaching will not become a competitive and highly desirable career option. Unless this issue is resolved, both the quantity and the quality of teacher education applicants will continue to be low, and teachers will continue to leave the field for better-paying positions.

Since personal ambition and job interest are affected by opportunities for promotion, more recognition and promotional incentives should be offered to teachers. In addition, schools might also increase the possibility of vertical mobility within the organization.

Teacher education programs can benefit from research on student retention. By focusing on intervention for the very youngest student, the kindergarten child, failure at the early levels may be reduced. Alternative programs at the middle-school level to meet the needs of the gifted and the frustrated should reduce failure at this critical point. These programs should lead to greater percentages of students completing high school. In addition, teacher training institutions should prepare future teachers to meet the needs of these students and to work more effectively with high-risk students who are potential dropouts.

It is projected that attracting and retaining highly qualified students into teacher education programs will remain a concern for higher education for some time. Suggestions offered by research in this area offer directions to be followed in the coming decades.

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